That Suitable Girl

REVISITING *DULHAN WAHI JO PIYA MAN BHAAYE*

It was 1977. The year of b-o biggies like *Amar Akbar Anthony, Apnapan, Dharamveer, Hum Kisise Kum Nahin, Khoon Pasina* and *Parvarish*.

Cut to Rajshri Productions' *Dulhan Wahi Jo Piya Man Bhaaye*, which defied all the prerequisites of success. It featured a flop hero, a flop director and a new heroine. It was made on a piffling budget and there was a warning from Shakti Samanta to scrap the film because "seven versions of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* have already flopped in India."

Incredibly, *Dulhan...* was a winner—a surprise packet—which completed a silver jubilee run. Today, its director Lekh Tandon laughs, "Shakti*da* meant well. But the earlier versions had a wayward daughter, not a son. That's why they failed. Anyway, my film was only inspired and not copied from *Pygmalion*."

Incidentally, Rajshri Productions or the Barjatyas had hired Lekh Tandon to work on *Alibaba Chalis Chor...* but the project was grounded.

Recalls the snow-haired director today, "Though Raj*babu* (Rajkumar Barjatya) knew what he wanted, he couldn't quite express himself. When things weren't working out, I asked him to give me a month. I needed to earn some money desperately."

Fortuitously for Tandon, scenes just breezed through his mind and the script's first draft was ready within 15 days. The story was simple. A rich man, Seth Harikishen, is grievously ill and wants to see his grandson Prem married. To appease the old man, the grandson hires a flower seller, Kammo, to pose as his fianceé. Kammo wins over the grandfather and falls in love with the grandson. QED.

Rajkumar Barjatya was pleased, Lekh Tandon was on.

Though Tanuja was initially considered for the role, Rameshwari—a *bindaas*

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> —Rameshwari

girl in real life—was finally chosen to play the straight-laced Kammo. A Pune Film Institute graduate, Rameshwari who made her debut with this film, reminisces, "I'd been offered three or four films earlier but things hadn't worked out. My earlier rounds to the Rajshri office had proved futile. Eventually when they called, I was fed up and didn't want to go."

But Rameshwari was pencilled in after Lekh Tandon spotted his heroine on the steps of Mumbai's Sterling cinema, in jeans and T-shirt with boyfriend Deepak in tow. The director reprimanded her, "Get serious! Why haven't you gone to the Rajshri office yet?" Followed an unusual screen test. She was made to drape a sari and rattle off her dialogue in English because she was uncomfortable with *shudh* Hindi.

Prem Krishen...the son of Premnath... who'd made a disastrous debut with *Jaan Haazir Hai* was cast as the immature grandson Prem. Lekh Tandon wasn't happy with the choice. Now, he admits sportingly, "I was wrong. Prem wasn't a great actor or looker. But that eventually worked in our favour. If the guy had looked intelligent, the character would've fallen flat."

Flashbacks Prem Krishen, "I was to play a spoilt brat. The character had shades of grey, I had to ensure that the audience didn't hate the hero. It was tough."

Madan Puri, who played the lovable grandfather, felt that Lekh Tandon was making a mistake by casting him in a positive role. He insisted, "My villainous image is much too strong. This is not going to work." Little did he know at the time that his performance, laced with delightful sincerity, would be one of the highlights of *Dulhan*...

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> —Prem Krishen

The film took 10 months to complete. Of course, no one in the unit had any inkling that they were working on a potential blockbuster. Says Lekh Tandon, "Mrs Krishna Raj Kapoor liked the film at the trial show. She has the knack of recognising successful films. Still, I didn't expect it to cross the silver jubilee mark!"

Ask Rameshwari about some memorable moments on the sets and she smiles, "I was supposed to cry on Madan Puri*ji*'s shoulders. I just couldn't. Finally, he said, 'Go ahead and cheat. Just lean on me. I'll take care of the rest!' I ended up giggling on his shoulder."

The *lori* song sequence tormented the newcomer majorly. She just had an hour to mug up the lyrics. Worse, it was a one-take sequence. "I'd been over-confident till then," she ha-ha's now. "I shivered at the prospect of remembering so many lines of Hindi. Somehow, I managed. We completed the song in two hours flat."

Old is gold: Madan Puri and Iftekhar

Gaana *with the wind: Shyamlee and Prem Krishen*

Meanwhile, Shyamlee, who played the vampish Rita, had to underplay her part. Remembers Prem, "She was quite pretty. We couldn't afford to let her overshadow the heroine." She didn't.

The film, in keeping with the Rajshri tradition, was released without much publicity. Ajit Kumar Barjatya states, "Except for newspaper ads, there was no publicity. We released the film only in Mumbai at Ganga and Badal. Expectedly, it took six weeks to catch on with word-of-mouth praise. It ran to full houses after that. Subsequently, we released it in other theatres and other parts of India."

Ravindra Jain's songs *Le to aaye ho* and *Khushiyan hi khushiyan* fuelled the *Dulhan Wahi...* appeal. By the way, four of the composer's songs were chopped at the editing table.

Unfortunately, none of the cast and crew enjoyed the fruits of the film's success. Lekh Tandon could never again measure up to the lustre of *Dulhan Wahi...* His next few releases *Ek Baar Kaho, Doosri Dulhan* and *Agar Tum Na Hote* did average business. With the advent of TV, he switched to serials.

Rameshwari's career zoomed but her happiness was short-lived. After working in a couple of films, she had a near-fatal accident. She shudders, "It was a traumatic phase. The media splashed reports that I'd lost an eye... which was untrue. I'm still asked if I'm blind. Can you believe that...?"

That certainly didn't stop her from finding success in films like *Sunayna* and *Aasha.* Quiz Rameshwari on her life and she quips, "I would have liked to make some more money in my time... but some top actresses played dirty and grabbed my roles. I would talk to directors and finalise projects. The next thing I know is that someone else has been signed. It was very disheartening. I couldn't handle the politics. So I quit." She married long-time fiance Deepak; today, they have two teenaged sons.

Prem Krishen made a few more attempts at acting... in vain. He finally struck gold with Cinevista, his TV production company. His daughter Akanksha is carrying the family's acting tradition forward.

Shyamlee disappeared into oblivion after *Dulhan Wahi...* Some wrong decisions and her impulsive nature put the brakes on her film career. She married one of Mehmood's sons Pucky. Efforts to contact her proved futile. "She's dead... she passed away," said a showbizwallah. Sadly, today no one remembers that there was a Shyamlee who sizzled in a whopping hit once upon a time.

But that's showbiz. Hot today, forgotten tomorrow.

Hamida Parkar

Prem Krishen wasn't a great actor or looker. If he'd looked intelligent, the character would've fallen flat

—Lekh Tandon